

The Real Lessons of PISA

By **Diane Ravitch** on December 14, 2010

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Dear Deborah,

When the results of the latest international assessment—the Program for International Student Assessment, or **PISA**—were released, our national leaders sounded an alarm about a national "crisis in education." Our students scored in the middle of the pack! We are not No. 1! Shanghai is No. 1! We are doomed unless we overtake Shanghai!

President Obama and Secretary Arne Duncan warned ominously that our nation was having a "Sputnik moment." We have fallen behind the global competition in education, they cried, evoking comparison with the Soviet Union's launch of a space satellite in 1957. At that time, the media and the politicians predicted that the Soviets would soon rule the world, and we know how that turned out.

Now the politicians would like to use the latest test scores to promote their "reform" agenda for the schools: more charter schools, more reliance on competition and free-market strategies, more testing, more use of test scores to evaluate teachers, more firing of principals and teachers, more closing of low-scoring schools.

Our leaders in Washington would have us believe that they know how to close the achievement gap and how to overtake the highest-performing nations in the world. PISA proves that they don't.

Consider the two top contenders on PISA: Shanghai and Finland. These two places—one a very large city of nearly 21 million, the other a small nation of less than six million—represent two very different approaches to education. The one thing they have in common is that neither of the world leaders in education is doing what American reformers propose.

According to the OECD, the international group that sponsors PISA, the schools of Shanghai—like those in all of China—are dominated by pressure to get higher scores on examinations. OECD writes:

"Teaching and learning, in secondary schools in particular, are predominantly determined by the examination syllabi, and school activities at that level are very much oriented towards exam preparation. Subjects such as music and art, and in some cases even physical education, are removed from the timetable because they are not covered in the public examinations. Schools work their students for long hours every day, and the work weeks extend into the weekends, mainly for additional exam preparation classes...private tutorials, most of them profit-making, are widespread and have become almost a household necessity."

OECD points out that more than 80 percent of students in Shanghai attend after-school tutoring. It remarked on the academic intensity of Chinese students. Non-attention is not tolerated. As I read about the "intense concentration" of these students, I was reminded of the astonishing opening event of the Beijing Olympics, when 15,000 participants performed tightly scripted routines. It is hard to imagine a similar event performed by American youth, who are accustomed not to intense discipline, but to a culture of free expression and individualism.

Interestingly, the authorities in Shanghai boast not about their testing routines, but about their

consistent and effective support for struggling teachers and schools. When a school is in trouble in Shanghai, authorities say they pair it with a high-performing school. The teachers and leaders of the strong school help those in the weak school until it improves. The authorities send whatever support is needed to help those who are struggling. In the [OECD video about Shanghai](#), the lowest-performing school in the city is described as one where "only" 89 percent of students passed the state exams! With the help sent by the leaders of the school system, it eventually reached the target of 100 percent.

Finland is at the other end of the educational spectrum. Its education system is modeled on American progressive ideas. It is student-centered. It has a broad (and non-directive) national curriculum. Its teachers are drawn from the top 10 percent of university graduates. They are highly educated and well prepared. Students never take a high-stakes test; their teachers make their own tests. The only test they take that counts is the one required to enter university.

Last week, I went to a luncheon with Pasi Sahlberg, the Finnish education expert. I asked him the question that every politician asks today: "If students don't take tests, how do you hold teachers and schools accountable?" He said that there is no word in the Finnish language for "accountability." He said, "We put well-prepared teachers in the classroom, give them maximum autonomy, and we trust them to be responsible."

I asked him if teachers are paid more for experience. He said, "Of course." And what about graduate degrees? He said, "Every teacher in Finland has a master's degree." He added: "We don't believe in competition among students, teachers, or schools. We believe in collaboration, trust, responsibility, and autonomy."

Since I have not visited schools in either Shanghai or Finland, I am certainly no expert. It was interesting to watch the [short videos](#) about their schools, found here. It is also interesting to consider what these two very different systems have in common: They place their bets on expert, experienced teachers and on careful training of their new teachers. They rely on well-planned, consistent support of teachers to improve their schools continuously.

These two systems are diametrically opposed in one sense: Shanghai relies heavily on testing to meet its goals; Finland emphasizes child-centered methods. Yet they have these important things in common: Neither of them does what the United States is now promoting: They do not hand students over to privately managed schools; they do not accept teachers who do not intend to make teaching their profession; they do not have principals who are non-educators; they do not have superintendents who are non-educators; they do not "turn around" schools by closing them or privatizing them; they do not "improve" schools by firing the principal or the teachers. They respect their teachers. They focus relentlessly on improving teaching and learning, as it is defined in their culture and society.

The lesson of PISA is this: Neither of the world's highest-performing nations do what our "reformers" want to do. How long will it take before our political leaders begin to listen to educators? How long will it take before they realize that their strategies have not worked anywhere? How long will it be before they stop inflicting their bad ideas on our schools, our students, our teachers, and American education?

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